DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 253 RC 018 359

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TITLE A Study Concerning Stress among High School Students in Selected Rural Schools.
PUB DATE 12 Aug 91
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Education Conference (Cookeville, TN, August 12, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Coping; Educational Environment; High Schools; *High School Students; Questionnaires; *Rural Schools; *Sex Differences; *Stress Variables; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This study identifies stressful events in the lives of high school students in a rural region of Tennessee. Questionnaires were completed by 240 high school students (144 female and 96 male). The questionnaires included 19 statements to which the participants were to respond concerning their belief about the stressfulness of the situation described. In addition, the participants were asked about their coping skills and with whom they discussed school-related problems. The majority of students reported the following stressors: (1) academic classwork; (2) relationships with the opposite sex; (3) concern about grades; (4) feelings about personal appearance; (5) pressures to succeed and achieve; (6) test-taking; (7) feelings about self-worth and personal respect; (8) peer acceptance; (9) relationships with friends; and (10) "problems" at school. The majority of females also found substance abuse and thoughts about the future to be stressful. The majority of males found school rules, outside employment, concern about financial obligations, and involvement in co-curricular activities to be stressful. Participants identified persons with whom they would most likely discuss a school problem. The males ranked their choices (in descending order) as counselors, friends, parents, teachers, and the school principal. Females chose counselors, teachers, parents, friends, and the school principal. More females than males indicated that they did not cope well with stress. (KS)

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A STUDY CONCERNING STRESS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SELECTED RURAL SCHOOLS

ED 368358

A Research Paper
Presented to Educators
at the Annual Education Conference
held at Tennessee Tech University
on August 12, 1991 in Cookeville, Tennessee

by

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CE 018359

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Introduction

Stress is a part of comtemporary living and has become a matter of some concern in the field of education. Hans Selye defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to demands placed upon it." (Selye, p. 14) Responses to stress are often uncontroled and reactionary with physiological, behavorial and psychological consequences. All incidences of stress are not necessarily negative. Sometimes limited anxiety and tension are essential for optimal performance. The average person has the capacity to live through stressful situations-even crises-and to adjust to a normal state when the upsetting situation passes. (National Mental Health Association, p. 1) Conversely, there are negetive results of stress. High levels of uncontrolled, intense stress may reduce physical resistance, lower productivity, disrupt routines, cause behavior problems, result in physical or mental illness or numerous other anti-social conditions.

People of all ages are effected by stress. High school students seem especially vulnerable to this reality. Adolescence is a time of rapid biological change, personal development, social interactions, societal expectations, and peer influence. The loci of much of this phenomenon is in the school environment.

Statement of the Problem

High school students perceptions concerning the kinds of stress experienced and its causes are important when considering techniques to reduce stressful situations or conditions. This study was designed to identify causes of stress that high

school students encounter in selected school activities or related circumstances.

Importance of the Study

Although there has been considerable study about stress, much of the research has focused on adult conditions. This study is intended to review stressful events in the lives of high school students in a rural region of the State of Tennessee. Student's perceptions should provide certain information that will assist program planners, counselors and other school personnel in addressing the issue of stress in the schools. Managing stress effectively may help students be more successful and satisfied in their school experience.

Research Procedure

Questionnaries were distributed to 300 high school students representing five rural high schools in the Upper Cumberland - central region of Tennessee. The questionnaires included 19 statements to which the participants were to respond concerning their belief about the stressfulness of the situation described. In addition the participants were asked about their coping skills and with whom they discussed school related problems. The questionnaires were distributed by the counselor(s) in each of the schools and a total of 240 completed, useable questionnaires were returned for analysis. The Chi Square Test was used to determine if a significant difference at the .05 level existed between the responses of the males and females.

Report of the Findings

The effects of stress in the lives of young people varies. Intense pressure from stressful events may interfere with academic performance, cause physical or mental health problems and result in unusual changes in behavior. The adverse physical effects of stress include increases in blood pressure, heart and breathing rates, headaches and serious illnesses. Psychological symptoms of uncontrolled stress are anxiety, procrastination, dissatisfaction with circumstances and boredom. Behaviorally related stress symptoms include changes in achievement levels, absenteesim, sleeping disorders, changes in usual habits and other altered behavior.

One's susceptibility and reaction to stress involves a complex set of interactions to stressful environments or situations. The effects of stress may be influenced by the number of stressful occurances, the duration of the stress, crisis or problems experienced and the strength of one's support systems. High school age youth experience many changes, as well as, face numerous constraints and demands in their school and home lives. Exposure to chronic stress often results in barriers to personal adjustments and successful living. It is necessary to understand the causes of stress among high school students so that appropriate action may be taken and programs implemented to help those effected cope with stress and live as a happier person.

This study focused on some of the major causes of stress in the the lives of high school students. A total of 240 students (144 female and 96 male) responded to a questionnaire concerning

situations that cause stress. The results of the study are presented by each questionnaire item.

1. Academic classwork such as mathematics and science causes more stress than elective type coursework.

	Male	Female
Agree	62 - 65%	81 - 56%
Disagree	34 - 35%	63 - 44%

Chi Square 1.6610
Significance Level .1975 Not Significant at .05

2. School and classroom rules cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	73 - 76%	45 - 31%
Disagree	23 - 24%	99 - 69%

Chi Square 46.24
Significance Level .0001 Significant at .05

3. Relationships with the oposite sex cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	64 - 67%	83 - 58%
Disagree	32 - 33%	61 - 42%

Chi Square .5417
Significance Level .4617 Not Significant at .05

4. Concern about grades cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	58 - 60%	101 - 70%
Disagree	38 - 40%	43 - 30%

Chi Square 2.4350
Significance Level .1187 Not Significant at .05

5. Negative home and family relations cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	28 - 29%	37 - 26%
Disagree	68 - 71%	107 - 74%

Chi Square .2960
Significance Level .5864 Not Significant at .05

6. Substance use (alcohol and other drugs) cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	18 - 19%	121 - 84%
Disagree	78 - 81%	23 - 16%

Chi Square 100.7023
Significance Level .0001 Significant at .05

7. Feelings about personal appearance cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	53 - 55%	99 - 69%
Disagree	43 - 45%	45 - 31%

Chi Square 4.5484
Significance Level .0329 Significant at .05

8. Outside employment responsibilities cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	67 - 70%	32 - 22%
Disagree	29 - 30%	112 - 78%

Chi Square 53.7832
Significance Level .0001 Significant at .05

9. Existing teacher attitudes and classroom climate cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	25 - 26%	43 - 30%
Disagree	71 - 74%	101 - 70%

Chi Square .4138
Significance Level .5200 Not significant at .05

10. Pressure to succeed and achieve cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	65 - 68%	106 - 74%
Disagree	31 - 32%	38 - 26%

Chi Square .9797
Significance Level .3223 Not Significant at .05

11. Taking test causes stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	63 - 66%	88 - 61%
Disagree	33 - 34%	56 - 39%

Chi Square .5030
Significance Level .4782 Not Significant at .05

12. Concern about financial obligations cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	65 - 68%	35 - 24%
Disagree	31 - 32%	109 - 76%

Chi Square 44.6429
Significance Level .0001 Significant at .05

13. Feelings about self worth and personal respect cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	54 - 56%	103 - 72%
Disagree	42 - 44%	41 - 28%

Chi Square 5.9428
Significance Level .0148 Significant at .05

14. Involvement and participation in co-curricular activities cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	66 - 69%	27 - 19%
Disagree	30 - 31%	117 - 81%

Chi Square 60.6715
Significance Level .0001 Significant at .05

15. Concern about my health causes stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	08 - 08%	24 - 17%
Disagree	88 - 92%	120 - 81%

Chi Square 3.4615
Significance Level .0628 Not Significant at .05

16. Worry about being accepted by my peers causes stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	54 - 56%	104 - 72%
Disagree	42 - 44%	40 - 28%

Chi Square 6.5329
Significance Level .0106 Significant at .05

17. Concern about relationships with friends cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	76 - 79%	127 - 88%
Disagree	20 - 21%	17 - 12%

Chi Square 3.6001
Significance Level .0578 Not Significant at .05

18. "Problems" at school cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	60 - 63%	79 - 55%
Disagree	36 - 37%	65 - 45%

Chi Square 1.3790
Significance Level .2403 Not Significant at .05

19. Thoughts about my future success cause stress.

	Male	Female
Agree	38 - 40%	104 - 72%
Disagree	58 - 60%	40 - 28%

Chi Square 25.3981
Significance Level .0001 Significant at .05

20. I would most likely talk about school related problems with: (Check one)

Teacher:	Male 8 -	Female 24
Counselor:	Male 37 -	Female 64
Principal:	Male 3 -	Female 15
Friend:	Male 29 -	Female 20
Parent:	Male 19 -	Female 21

21. Check one of the following:

I cope well with stress.	Male 23 - Female 28
I cope OK with stress.	Male 47 - Female 37
I don't handle stress well.	Male 26 - Female 79

Summary

The participants in the study agreed that the work load in traditional acdemic classes cause more stress than general elective courses. Likewise, both males and females thought that striving for grades and test taking were stressful. The male respondents were more concerned with pressure from school and classroom rules than were the females in the study. A majority of the subjects stated that demands placed on them to succeed and to achieve caused stress in their lives. It can be concluded that problem situations experienced by students at high school brings about stress in their environment. Thoughts about the future and overall success in life were more troublesome to female students than to males.

It is noteworthy that both males and females indicated that relationships with the opposite sex created stress. About one-third of the students in the study considered home and family relations to be stressors.

A majority of the respondents were sensitive to feelings of self worth and personal respect. Considerations about health status were not a matter of consternation for most males and only some seventeen percent of the females indicated concern about health issues. There was a difference between the groups in their opinions concerning drugs and other substance abuse. Some 84 percent of the females thought that alcohol and other drug use caused stress where 19 percent of male subjects believed that such abuse was a negative influence. The two groups were in agreement that concern about personal appearance resulted in stressfulness. The data show that worry about

being accepted by friends and peers was a matter of serious concern.

Involvement in extra curricular programs is more stressful for males than females. The same seems true for concern over financial obligations and outside employment responsibilities. The students in the study did not think that their teacher's attitudes and their classroom climates were the basis of stress at their schools.

The study participants identified with whom they would most likely discuss a school problem. The male students ranked their choices (in decending order of choice) as counselors, friends, parents, teachers and the school principal. Females chose (first to last) counselors, teachers, parents, friends and the school principal. The two groups were asked to indicate their level of coping skills. A total of 47 males reported that they coped "OK" with stress, 23 stated that they coped well and 26 indicated that they did not cope well with stress in their lives. There were 28 female high school students who said that they coped well with stress, 37 coped "OK" and 79 stated that they did not cope well with stress.

It is obvious that stress is a condition about which the students in the study have concern. Unmanaged stress may have serious consequences. School leaders should give concerted attention to helping students cope with factors causing stress at school. A planned effort to provide assistance and support to students should include opportunities for meaningful and direct communication, professional counseling services, the enhancement of the worth and dignity of all individuals through

democratic practice and personal recognition of all students for their contributions to the success of the school and its programs.

The following guidelines may be helpful when considering ways to control harmful stress:

1. Identify specific goals to accomplish.
2. Set priorities for school, home and social activities.
3. Keep a "to do" list.
4. Identify and participate in activities that give personal satisfaction.
5. Don't try to be a perfectionist.
6. Learn to say "NO" and stick with your decision.
7. Be selective in activities you agree to complete.
8. Engage in new and difference experiences.
9. Take time to relax and exercise regularly.
10. Eat properly and don't abuse drugs.
11. Don't cncentrate on those things for which you have no control and think positive.
12. Set aside some time for yourself.

References

Hans Selye, Stress Without Distress, New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1974.

How to Deal With Your Tensions, National Mental Health Association, Arlington, Virginia.